



Committee on HOMELAND SECURITY

Chairman Michael McCaul

Opening Statement

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Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Richard Hudson (R-NC) Subcommittee on Transportation Security

“Safeguarding Privacy and Civil Liberties while Keeping our Skies Safe”

Remarks as Prepared

I would like to thank our witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee today. This hearing is an opportunity to discuss how the Federal Government is working to balance civil liberties protections for U.S. citizens with the security of our aviation system.

Last week, our nation observed the 13th anniversary of 9/11. Together, we remembered both the cowardly acts that took the lives of over 3,000 innocent people and the bravery of our first responders on that tragic day. 9/11 is the very reason our Committee was created, and we must do everything we can to protect the homeland and prevent other attacks.

The fact remains that our enemies still view the U.S. aviation sector as a highly attractive target, as evidenced by several thwarted plots and attempted attacks. In addition to the threats posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the thousands of foreign fighters, including U.S. citizens, affiliated with terrorist groups like ISIS are a growing and serious threat to the security of U.S. aviation and the homeland. It is critical that we accurately identify individuals who pose this threat and prevent them from boarding flights to the United States.

TSA relies on a multi-layered approach to aviation security with everything from Federal Air Marshals, to canines, to the latest explosives detection technology. One of these layers is a behind-the-scenes program known as Secure Flight. This program, which is the subject of today’s hearing, takes passenger data it receives from airlines and matches it against the U.S. Government’s consolidated Terrorist Watch List, including the No Fly and Selectee Lists. This program is crucial not only for domestic flights, but also for protecting international flights bound for the United States.

Since 2009, TSA’s Secure Flight Program has evolved from one that looks solely at the No Fly List and Selectee List maintained by the Terrorist Screening Center, to one that assigns passengers a risk category and uses additional criteria to identify high-risk passengers who might not be on the Watch List. While these lists serve as an important counterterrorism tool, we must ensure that travelers who are incorrectly matched to a list are able to resolve those issues in a timely, effective manner.

In two comprehensive reports issued today, GAO found that TSA could improve Secure Flight by measuring and tracking errors that occur within the system and at the security-screening checkpoint. GAO also found that

TSA generally does a good job of protecting passenger data but could strengthen privacy awareness training among Secure Flight employees. I thank GAO for its thorough approach to examining this program and I look forward to hearing from TSA how the agency plans to implement GAO's recommendations.

In addition, we are pleased to have the Director of the Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) here today to discuss its role in managing the consolidated Terrorist Watch List, including the No Fly List. Yesterday the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, testifying before the Full Committee, highlighted the value of the consolidated Watch List and the T-S-C in making sure that front-line agencies like TSA are able to identify known or suspected terrorists and stop them from entering the country, boarding an airplane or obtaining a visa. I look forward to discussing those efforts in greater detail here today.

The bottom line is that our aviation security is only as strong as its weakest link. We must identify individuals who pose a threat, such as extremists with Western passports who have joined the fight in Iraq or Syria, and take the necessary steps to protect the homeland.

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